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ABSTRACT

This document is part of the series, "New Expeditions: Charting the Second Century of Community Colleges," sponsored by the W.K. Kellogg Foundation Initiative. This paper addresses the issues related to access at community colleges. Increases in high school completion rates have generated an enormous demand for higher education, much of which is absorbed at the community college level. Community colleges provide greater access and flexibility to students than any other sector of higher education. Universal accessibility, however, has created challenges for community colleges as they find themselves in the position of defending their identity as college-level institutions. Admission, which requires no minimum grade point average or college admission tests, is part of the flexibility that draws students to community colleges. However, the lack of such requirements means that there is very little data about the different levels of preparation and achievement by students when they enter community colleges. Critics maintain that much community college instruction is conducted at a high school level. The authors argue that providing more information about the personal, academic and work backgrounds of their students will help community colleges to better understand the degree to which they are fulfilling their mission. Five tables include statistics, broken down by race, about enrollment rates, part-time and full-time, at both two-year and four year institutions. (AF)

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NEW EXPEDITIONS
Charting the Second Century of Community Colleges
a W. K. Kellogg Foundation Initiative

ACCESS

ED 438 872

Issues Paper No. 1

Student Access in Community Colleges

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ABSTRACT

Community colleges provide greater access and flexibility to their students than virtually any other sector of higher education. This commitment to access has brought with it a daunting challenge, however, as community colleges now find themselves defending their identity as college-level institutions. Community colleges must find a way to collect crucial data in such areas as student profiles, student progress, and student needs in order to justify and verify the community college mission, particularly the commitment to open access.

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INTRODUCTION

American higher education has a 360-year history of expansion and innovation in the delivery of instruction, research, and service. Milestones in the history include the establishment of the four-year American baccalaureate degree in 1642 at Harvard College in Cambridge, Massachusetts, the master's degree at Harvard College in 1872, and the Ph.D. degree at Yale University in New Haven, Connecticut, in 1861. Other innovations include the evolution of 105 historically black colleges and universities, beginning with Cheney University in Pennsylvania in 1839, and growth and development of the land grant colleges and universities in 1862 and 1992. Each of these developments has produced greater access to higher education.

One of the most important innovations for higher education in the 20th century has been the establishment of two-year community colleges, which originated in part to help accommodate the growing demand by high school graduates to continue their education at the college level. Research indicates that each level of schooling creates the demand for the next level, and throughout the 20th century, the

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growth in high school completion rates has generated enormous demand for higher education in the United States (Cohen 1985; Illich 1971; Greene 1980). More than 90 percent of the American population has a high school diploma. The continuing growth in high school completion and the resulting demand for postsecondary education have made community colleges popular. Since 1901, with their beginnings in Joliet, Illinois, community colleges have provided greater access for students than any other sector of higher education.

Community colleges also have grown steadily in popularity, especially among part-time students. In 1996, more than 5.5 million of the nation's 12.2 million undergraduate students attended two-year colleges. Table 1 shows that in that year, 63.6 percent of community college students attended part time. Over the past two decades, part-time enrollment at community colleges increased by 60.6 percent, whereas full-time enrollment increased by 25.3 percent. Table 2 shows that both part-time enrollment and full-time enrollment grew more slowly at four-year institutions, by 24.1 percent and 17.5 percent, respectively (NCES 1977, 1987, and 1995).

Among part-time students, minority enrollment increased over the past two decades: Asian enrollment increased by 357.2 percent; Hispanic enrollment increased by 262.9 percent; and African American enrollment increased by 85.3 percent. At four-year institutions, minority enrollment among part-time students increased at a lower rate: Asian by 263.3 percent; Hispanic by 180 percent; African American by 54.5 percent. Similarly, minority enrollment at two-year

TABLE 1

Undergraduate Enrollment at Two-Year Institutions by Race and Enrollment Status: 1976, 1986, 1996

Full-Time and Part-Time

Year	Total	White, Non-Hispanic	African American, Non-Hispanic	Hispanic	Asian	Other
1976	3,743,480	2,963,773	415,313	206,906	78,201	79,287
1986	4,567,849	3,413,280	454,166	325,418	176,873	198,112
1996	5,454,020	3,706,716	623,898	642,911	322,328	158,172

Full-Time

Year	Total	White, Non-Hispanic	African American, Non-Hispanic	Hispanic	Asian	Other
1976	1,582,984	1,208,396	211,369	89,724	32,765	40,730
1986	1,633,724	1,184,191	198,418	118,445	64,361	68,309
1996	1,984,141	1,330,572	246,066	217,628	114,579	75,296
Percent Change						
1976–1996	25.3	10.1	16.4	142.6	249.7	84.9
1986–1996	21.4	12.4	24.0	83.7	78.0	10.2

Part-Time

Year	Total	White, Non-Hispanic	African American, Non-Hispanic	Hispanic	Asian	Other
1976	2,160,496	1,755,377	203,944	117,182	45,436	38,557
1986	2,934,125	2,229,089	255,748	206,973	112,512	129,803
1996	3,469,879	2,376,144	377,827	425,283	207,749	82,876
Percent Change						
1976–1996	60.6	35.4	85.3	262.9	357.2	114.9
1986–1996	18.3	7.9	47.7	105.5	84.6	–36.2

Source: National Center for Education Statistics (IPEDS)

TABLE 2

Undergraduate Enrollment at Four-Year Institutions by Race and Enrollment Status: 1976, 1986, 1996

Full-Time and Part-Time

Year	Total	White, Non-Hispanic	African American, Non-Hispanic	Hispanic	Asian	Other
1976	5,686,803	4,776,499	528,036	145,985	91,088	145,200
1986	6,208,613	4,979,454	525,135	220,459	201,808	281,758
1996	6,762,544	4,988,610	723,326	421,454	390,301	238,853

Full-Time

Year	Total	White, Non-Hispanic	African American, Non-Hispanic	Hispanic	Asian	Other
1976	4,447,502	3,736,907	414,220	108,328	71,664	116,383
1986	4,698,380	3,779,704	397,842	156,339	160,509	203,986
1996	5,224,166	3,841,718	547,479	316,018	319,736	199,215
Percent Change						
1976–1996	17.5	2.8	32.2	191.7	346.2	71.2
1986–1996	11.2	1.6	37.6	102.1	99.2	-2.3

Part-Time

Year	Total	White, Non-Hispanic	African American, Non-Hispanic	Hispanic	Asian	Other
1976	1,239,306	1,039,592	113,816	37,657	19,424	28,817
1986	1,510,233	1,199,750	127,292	64,120	41,299	77,772
1996	1,538,378	1,146,892	175,847	105,436	70,565	39,638
Percent Change						
1976–1996	24.1	10.3	54.5	180.0	263.3	37.6
1986–1996	1.9	-4.4	38.1	64.4	70.9	-49.0

Source: National Center for Education Statistics (IPEDS)

colleges also has exceeded that of four-year colleges over the past two decades. Table 1 shows that full-time enrollment at two-year colleges increased by 16 percent for African Americans, by 143 percent for Hispanics, and by 250 percent for Asians. Table 2 shows the comparable full-time rates of growth at four-year colleges: 32 percent for African Americans, 192 percent for Hispanics, and 346 percent for Asians. These data support Judith Eaton's (1994) contention that much of the growth in higher education could not have occurred without two-year colleges (NCES 1977, 1987, and 1995).

Two-year colleges also reported growth in enrollment among women during that period. Table 3 illustrates that full-time female enrollment increased by 53.3 percent, and part-time female enrollment increased by 82.8 percent. Table 4 shows that at four-year institutions, full-time female enrollment grew by 35.5 percent, and part-time female enrollment grew by 43.3 percent.

Enrollment Challenges

If viewed in the traditional college attendance context, the completion and transfer rates of students who enter community colleges appear to be low. Fewer than one-fourth of individuals who began their postsecondary education at a community college in 1989–90 had attained an associate degree

TABLE 3

Undergraduate Enrollment at Two-Year Institutions by Race and Gender: 1976, 1986, 1996

Full-Time and Part-Time

Year	Total	Total Men	Total Women	White, Non-Hispanic	White Men	White Women	African American, Non-Hispanic
1976	3,743,480	1,911,017	1,832,463	2,963,773	1,517,105	1,446,668	415,313
1986	4,567,849	2,014,323	2,553,526	3,413,280	1,495,409	1,917,791	454,166
1996	5,454,020	2,317,348	3,136,672	3,706,716	1,581,502	2,125,214	623,893

Full-Time

Year	Total	Total Men	Total Women	White, Non-Hispanic	White Men	White Women	African American, Non-Hispanic
1976	1,582,984	862,955	720,029	1,208,396	668,235	540,161	211,369
1986	1,633,724	797,250	836,474	1,184,191	584,865	599,326	198,418
1996	1,984,141	880,474	1,103,667	1,330,572	603,209	727,363	246,066
Percent Change							
1976–1996	25.3	2.0	53.3	10.1	-9.7	34.7	16.4
1986–1996	21.4	10.4	31.9	12.4	3.1	21.4	24.0

Part-Time

Year	Total	Total Men	Total Women	White, Non-Hispanic	White Men	White Women	African American, Non-Hispanic
1976	2,160,496	1,048,062	1,112,434	1,755,377	848,870	906,507	203,944
1986	2,934,125	1,217,073	1,717,052	2,229,089	910,624	1,318,465	255,748
1996	3,469,879	1,436,874	2,033,005	2,376,144	978,293	1,397,851	377,827
Percent Change							
1976–1996	60.6	37.1	82.8	35.4	15.2	54.2	85.3
1986–1996	18.3	18.1	18.4	6.6	7.4	6.0	47.7

Source: National Center for Education Statistics (IPEDS)

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African American Men	African American Women	Hispanic	Hispanic Men	Hispanic Women	Asian	Asian Men	Asian Women	Other
194,765	220,548	206,906	112,804	94,102	78,201	42,162	36,039	79,287
179,568	274,598	325,418	150,721	174,697	176,873	92,295	84,578	198,112
231,183	392,710	642,710	277,924	364,987	322,328	155,855	166,473	158,172

African American Men	African American Women	Hispanic	Hispanic Men	Hispanic Women	Asian	Asian Men	Asian Women	Other
100,095	111,274	89,724	50,687	39,037	32,765	18,991	13,774	40,730
83,075	115,343	118,445	55,568	62,877	64,361	36,325	28,036	68,309
91,935	154,131	217,628	92,049	125,579	114,579	57,976	56,603	75,296

-8.2	38.5	142.6	81.6	221.7	249.7	205.3	310.9	84.9
10.7	33.6	83.7	65.7	99.7	78.0	59.6	101.9	10.2

African American Men	African American Women	Hispanic	Hispanic Men	Hispanic Women	Asian	Asian Men	Asian Women	Other
94,670	109,274	117,182	62,117	55,065	45,436	23,171	22,265	38,557
96,493	159,255	206,973	95,153	111,820	112,512	55,970	56,542	129,803
139,248	238,579	425,283	185,875	239,408	207,749	97,879	109,870	82,876

47.1	118.3	262.9	199.2	334.8	357.2	322.4	393.5	114.9
44.3	49.8	105.5	95.3	114.1	84.6	74.9	94.3	-36.2

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TABLE 4

Undergraduate Enrollment at Four-Year Institutions by Race and Gender: 1976, 1986, 1996

Full-Time and Part-Time

Year	Total	Total Men	Total Women	White, Non-Hispanic	White Men	White Women	African American, Non-Hispanic
1976	5,686,808	2,992,390	2,694,418	4,776,499	2,534,959	2,241,540	528,036
1986	6,208,613	2,992,546	3,216,067	4,979,454	2,405,899	2,573,555	525,134
1996	6,762,544	3,063,089	3,699,455	4,988,610	2,283,584	2,705,026	723,326

Full-Time

Year	Total	Total Men	Total Women	White, Non-Hispanic	White Men	White Women	African American, Non-Hispanic
1976	4,447,502	2,379,420	2,068,082	3,736,907	2,017,221	1,719,686	414,220
1986	4,698,380	2,339,133	2,359,247	3,779,704	1,887,085	1,892,619	397,842
1996	5,224,166	2,422,374	2,801,792	3,841,718	1,802,076	2,039,642	547,479
Percent Change							
1976–1996	17.5	1.8	35.5	2.8	–10.7	18.6	32.2
1986–1996	11.2	3.6	18.8	1.8	–4.5	7.8	37.6

Part-Time

Year	Total	Total Men	Total Women	White, Non-Hispanic	White Men	White Women	African American, Non-Hispanic
1976	1,239,306	612,970	626,336	1,039,592	517,738	521,854	113,816
1986	1,510,233	653,413	856,820	1,199,750	518,814	680,936	127,292
1996	1,538,378	640,715	897,663	1,146,892	481,508	665,384	175,847
Percent Change							
1976–1996	24.1	4.5	43.3	10.3	–7.0	27.5	54.5
1986–1996	1.9	–1.9	4.8	–4.4	–7.2	–2.3	38.1

Source: National Center for Education Statistics (IPEDS)

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African American Men	African American Women	Hispanic	Hispanic Men	Hispanic Women	Asian	Asian Men	Asian Women	Other
235,899	292,137	145,985	78,847	67,138	91,088	48,914	42,174	145,200
216,201	308,933	220,459	104,888	115,571	201,808	106,562	95,246	281,758
278,231	445,095	421,454	185,233	236,221	390,301	190,600	199,701	238,853

African American Men	African American Women	Hispanic	Hispanic Men	Hispanic Women	Asian	Asian Men	Asian Women	Other
186,520	227,700	108,328	58,904	49,424	71,664	38,777	32,887	116,383
168,692	229,150	156,339	75,567	80,772	160,509	85,274	75,235	203,986
217,137	330,342	316,018	139,884	176,134	319,736	156,429	163,307	199,215

16.4	45.1	191.7	137.5	256.4	346.2	303.4	396.6	71.2
28.7	44.2	102.1	85.1	118.1	99.2	83.4	117.1	-2.3

African American Men	African American Women	Hispanic	Hispanic Men	Hispanic Women	Asian	Asian Men	Asian Women	Other
49,379	64,437	37,657	19,943	17,714	19,424	10,137	9,287	28,817
47,509	79,783	64,120	29,321	34,799	41,299	21,288	20,011	77,772
61,094	114,753	105,436	45,349	60,087	70,565	34,171	36,394	39,638

23.7	78.1	180.0	127.4	239.2	263.3	237.1	291.9	37.6
28.6	43.8	64.4	54.7	72.7	70.9	60.5	81.9	-49.0

(17.5 percent) or a certificate (5 percent) at the first institution in which they enrolled by spring 1994, five years later. Only 17.7 percent of those who began their postsecondary education in a community college in 1989–90 had earned an associate degree at any institution by 1994; 6.4 percent had earned a bachelor's degree. Community colleges must examine the completion rates and decide how to convey to the public, either that these are acceptable levels of completion and why, or set up a rate that we should aspire to achieve. At this time, the public has no basis for gauging the quality of community college completion rates, and there are no established standards (NCES 1977, 1987, and 1995).

About 22 percent of all students who first enrolled in a public two-year college in 1989 transferred to a four-year college or university within five years. A smaller percentage of African Americans than whites transferred to a four-year college or university (15 percent versus 22 percent). Common definitions of transfers are needed throughout the nation in order to develop normative standards for institutions to monitor their status and progress. Some colleges count as transfers only those students who receive an associate degree. Others include people who have completed a specified number of credit hours. Others include anyone who ever attended. In addition to clarifying and defining transfers, community colleges need to clarify acceptable standards of transfer rates.

Table 5 shows that, with the exception of whites, all groups represented a higher percent of associate degree recipients in 1995 than in 1977. Although the number of whites receiving associate degrees increased by 18 percent (from 342,281 to 405,087) between 1977 and 1995, there was a decline in the percentage of associate degree recipients among whites over the two decades. The number of associate degrees awarded to African Americans in the United States increased by 38 percent over the past two decades. African Americans received 9 percent of all associate degrees awarded nationwide in 1995, an increase from 8 percent in 1977 and from 8 percent in 1987. Hispanic and Asian students saw the highest percent increase in all associate degrees awarded over the past two decades. In the 20-year period, the number of degrees awarded to Hispanics increased by 111 percent, and the number awarded to Asians increased by 191 percent.

Community colleges aspire to accomplish a broad mission that is both a blessing and a curse. They are open-admissions institutions. They seek to prepare students for

TABLE 5

Change in the Number of Associate Degrees Awarded by Race: 1977 to 1995

	Year						Percent Change		
	1977		1987		1995				
Race	*n* =	percent	*n* =	percent	*n* =	percent	1977–1995	1977–1987	1987–1995
African American	33,142	8.2	33,744	7.7	45,887	8.5	38	2	36
White	342,281	84.2	345,155	79.2	405,087	75.1	19	1	18
Hispanic	16,635	4.1	18,395	4.2	35,048	6.5	111	11	91
Asian	6,921	1.7	11,157	2.6	20,164	3.7	191	61	81
Other	7,392	1.8	27,251	6.3	33,505	6.2	353	269	23
Total	406,371	100	435,702	100	539,691	100	33	7	24

Source: National Center for Education Statistics (IPEDS)

entry-level jobs in a broad range of technological, allied health, and business occupations. They aim to prepare students to transfer and succeed in upper-division baccalaureate degree programs. They seek to remain accessible for traditional-age and older students. They provide part-time and full-time degree credit courses as well as an array of nondegree credit courses. In general, community colleges do not require students to take college admissions tests, such as the American College Test (ACT) and the Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT), so the community colleges themselves are often the proving grounds for four-year college-level education.

There is hardly an urban or suburban area of the country that does not have a community college. They are commuter campuses designed to cater to the citizens and the industries of the community in which they are located. Community college budgets are supported more often by local tax revenue than are those of four-year institutions.

Arthur Cohen (1985) contended that each of these features has enhanced the attractiveness of community colleges for low-ability students and for those only casually committed to schooling. Cohen (1985) also observed that community colleges have absorbed the educational functions previously offered by other agencies, such as law enforcement programs from police academies, firefighter training from fire departments, and health technology and nursing programs from hospitals. At the same time, the colleges have provided an educational avenue for scores of people in the midst of traumatic life transitions that require special intervention. The literature is replete with anecdotes of people who exceed the traditional college age who need training or education in order to lead productive, fulfilling lives (Chaffe 1992).

As they continue managing a broad mission, community colleges are experiencing an identity crisis. Eaton (1994) points out the struggle within community colleges regarding curricula and whether occupationally oriented programs should contain liberal arts courses. Cohen (1985) observed how the growth trend in community colleges brought with it greater numbers of academically underprepared students who seemed unwilling or unable to carry out the level of work expected of college students. This raises the dilemma for community colleges as to whether they are providing college-level or high school-level educational programs (Cohen 1985; Eaton 1994).

Adding fuel to the debate are such programs as Middle College at LaGuardia Community College. Middle College is an alternative school for high-risk high school students (Chaffe 1992). Public policy and economic arguments favor community colleges that consider themselves to be college-level institutions. The high rates of participation lead to a higher demand for a college education, and community colleges are needed in order to meet this demand. Often, this demand leads to the inclusion of underprepared students. Consequently, community colleges enroll a higher share of underprepared students than do four-year colleges and universities. In fact, many people have difficulty distinguishing the high school and college-level instruction provided in community colleges. Eaton (1994) believes that college-level education is more attractive to taxpayers than for community colleges to provide high school-level education, and community colleges are struggling to affirm their identity as college-level institutions.

Access Issues for Community Colleges

Among the important access issues and challenges facing each community college, and community colleges collectively, are the following:

- Ensuring that knowledge and awareness about degree credit and nondegree credit courses and program offerings span the broad demographic range of citizens in their community.
- Ensuring that the public is aware of the range of services, such as transfer preparation and vocational retraining.
- Ensuring that admissions procedures and requirements are publicized across the demographic range of citizens in the community.
- Ensuring that the public understands the cost of attending community college

and that financial aid is available if needed.

- Recruiting underrepresented students, especially African American and Hispanic, especially into career-oriented degree tracks such as mathematics, the sciences, and technical fields in which they are currently not well represented.
- Ensuring that students who enter a community college with the aspiration or expectation of successfully graduating and transferring to a four-year institution are able to fulfill their educational objective.
- Ensuring that policies established to increase access also include consideration of persistence and completion.
- Ensuring that students who enroll and successfully persist, through either a general education or a vocational degree program, are adequately prepared to succeed academically at the next college (four-year) of their choice.
- Recruiting, employing, and retaining faculty who represent minority groups, especially African American and Hispanic.
- Ensuring that community colleges adapt to address the changing needs of their community.
- Ensuring that community colleges follow up with their graduates to know where they are employed or attending college, and how well they are progressing and performing.

Need for Better Data and Information

National, state, and institutional databases appear adequate for monitoring progress in the representation of men and women of various racial groups. At the national level, the Integrated Postsecondary Data System (IPEDS) monitors these trends. Many state systems also maintain enrollment data to use in their funding and appropriations formulas. Overall transfer rates, as well as transfer rates by race, gender, and age, can often be generated from state-level databases and from institutional databases. Many states are able to match individual students' records in public two-year colleges and four-year colleges to learn how students are progressing through their academic coursework at the two-year-college level and through the four-year level toward completing their baccalaureate degrees.

There are, however, many access issues about which data have not yet emerged, even at the institutional level. Community colleges typically do not require college admission test scores for students to be admitted; therefore, there is little data concerning the different levels of preparation and achievement by students as they enter community colleges. Routinely, community colleges administer placement tests to students upon their arrival on campus, permitting the college to intervene early in helping students improve their reading and math skills. The results of these assessments, however, are not used for reporting demographic differences in the population of students or for monitoring trends.

Community colleges are both lauded and admonished for their broad missions and for their open access. But in order to understand the degree to which they are fulfilling their missions, certain data that would be helpful but that are not readily available include the following: the personal, academic, and work backgrounds of students who apply and enroll; the career and personal interests of students who apply and enroll; the school and work plans of students who enroll; and the students' personal commitments outside of school and work.

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- Issues in Community College Governance
- Community College Leadership in the New Millennium
- The Search for the Learning-Centered College
- Technology and the Future of the Community College
- Community Colleges and Career Qualifications
- Charting the Future of Global Education in Community Colleges